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ABSTRACT

This digest examines issues concerning performance assessment of students receiving special education services. Issues addressed are: (1) need to infuse performance assessment into national programs including the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS); (2) current lack of inclusion of students with disabilities in the NAEP and the NALS assessment programs due to exclusive guidelines and a lack of accommodations; (3) suggestions for increasing participation of students with disabilities in national assessments (such as clarification of guidelines and use of reasonable accommodations and adaptations); (4) need to infuse performance assessment into state programs; (5) current exclusion of students with disabilities on most statewide assessments; and (6) suggestions for increasing the participation of students with disabilities in statewide assessments (such as including students with disabilities in pilot tests and consideration of equity issues in crafting the assessments). (DB)

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NATIONAL AND STATE PERSPECTIVES ON PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

Martha Thurlow

As a result of educational reform efforts over the past 2 decades, large scale assessment is being reconfigured with an emphasis on performance approaches. Unlike traditional multiple choice tests, performance assessments require students to create an answer or product that demonstrates their knowledge and skills. For students receiving special education services, issues involving inclusion and the provision of adequate accommodations emerge when national and state authorities use performance assessments to monitor the educational system.

Infusing Performance Assessment Into National Programs

The United States has a comprehensive assessment program at the federal level that tracks students' knowledge and skills over time. Performance based items are finding their way into national assessment systems.

1. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Known as the U.S.'s national "report card," the NAEP surveys students' educational achievement across time. In 1992, NAEP began experimenting with constructed-response items—a type of performance assessment—in the subject areas of mathematics and reading. For example:

   Grade 8: (Student reads and uses an actual bus schedule that includes tables, maps, and text.) Monthly bus passes are not valid on which routes?

   Grade 8: (Student reads two passages from the Oregon Trail, one an informational account of the Trail and the other a narrative piece based on a diary entry.) Pretend that you are a young adult of the 1840s who has caught a case of "Oregon fever." Use information from both passages and from your own knowledge to explain what you would do about Oregon fever and why.

2. National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS). As administered in 1992, NALS assessed adult literacy skills. Literacy tasks involving materials that adults typically encounter in their daily activities were built into the assessment.

How Have Students Receiving Special Education Services Fared on the NAEP and NALS?

Inclusion in the national data collection programs as a whole will enable students to be included in national assessments that use performance-based measures. Unfortunately, about 50% of students with disabilities are typically excluded from participating in national assessments. Why is this so?

- *Guidelines are exclusive*: It is questionable whether the guidelines themselves result in high exclusion rates. For example, NAEP guidelines allow students to be excluded if the student is mainstreamed less than 50% of the time in academic subjects and is judged to be incapable of taking part in the assessment.
- *Accommodations are not available*: Neither the NAEP or the NALS allow any accommodations or adaptations to be made for individuals who need them in order to participate meaningfully in the assessment.

Overall, school officials hesitate to include students with disabilities into high-stakes testing situations for obvious reasons. Without a guarantee that all districts are using the same guidelines to make exclusion/inclusion decisions, and without sensitivity to the individual needs of students that impede their success in testing situations, it is questionable whether districts will actively insist on including all students. However, at this time, a number of special educators are calling for national officials to study the best way that students with disabilities might be included in such assessments.

Suggestions for Increasing the Participation of Students with Disabilities in National Assessments

The use of performance assessments in national data-collection programs has been relatively narrow in scope; however, there is some evidence that assessment programs that have been inclusive of students with disabilities in the past (i.e., traditional assessments), tend to be inclusive of students in performance assessments. Key aspects to promoting participation of students with disabilities in large-scale assessments include

- Clarification of guidelines for exclusion/inclusion, covering guidelines related to test development, testing, and reporting of results.
- Use of reasonable accommodations, adaptations, and other modifications in assessment procedures (i.e., ones that would not threaten the technical adequacy of an assessment, such as using an interpreter for a student with a significant hearing impairment to give directions that are typically given orally).
- Monitoring of participation levels.
- Research on the effects of various modifications in assessments (including the use of different types of performance assessments) on the performance of students with disabilities and on the technical characteristics of the instruments.

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Infusing Performance Assessment into State Programs

Some 38 states are currently using or considering using some form of performance assessment in their statewide testing programs. Categories of assessment items include:

- Enhanced multiple-choice.
- Short-answer open-ended.
- Extended-response open-ended.
- Interview.
- Observation.
- Individual performance assessment.
- Group performance assessment.
- Portfolio or learning record.
- Project, exhibition, demonstration.

The content areas most typically targeted for performance assessment are writing, mathematics, and reading.

How Have Students Receiving Special Education Services Fared on Statewide Assessments?

The same problems found at the national level of excluding students with disabilities are also apparent at the state level. Complicating this situation is the fact that many states have no formal means in place for determining the extent to which students with disabilities were included in assessments or for isolating the data of students with disabilities from that of other students.

Presently, there is an effort in the states to quantify the number of students who are exempted or excluded from participation in the assessment, and to monitor closely the appropriateness of such exclusions.

Suggestions for Increasing the Participation of Students with Disabilities in Statewide Assessments

As new performance-based approaches are incorporated into state assessment programs, it is important to discern what it will take to ensure high participation of students with disabilities.

States can

1. Include students with disabilities in pilot tests. Keep data according to which students participated in the assessment, their category of disability, and their success.
2. Plan accommodations and adaptations for use by students with disabilities during the assessments.
    - Modify the presentation format—e.g., use a Braille version of the assessment; use an interpreter for a student with a significant hearing impairment.
    - Modify the response format—e.g., allow the student to produce the answers orally rather than in written form.
    - Modify time and scheduling—e.g., give the student more time to complete the assessment.
    - Modify the setting—e.g., have the student complete the assessment in a quiet area apart from other students.

    Refer to the student's IEP for specific accommodation strategies.
3. Consider equity issues—race, class, culture, gender biases—in crafting the assessments. Equity can become an issue when the performance tasks are within the experience of certain populations and not others. For example, consider the following example that recognizes the complications of disability: "Asking students to write about learning a sport, which is biased against those students whose disabilities, geographic location, or economic status have prevented them from learning a sport."
4. Monitor participation levels. Build in an accountability model that investigates consistently high levels of exclusion.
5. Clarify guidelines for exclusion and inclusion. Determine how results will be reported.

At the very least, states can make a commitment to include students with disabilities from the very start.

Although it is too early to tell if the use of performance assessments will result in greater participation of students with disabilities in statewide assessment programs, we can only hope that states will use this heightened interest as an opportunity to improve the educational experience for these students.

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